DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 753 CE 038 543

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TITLE Older Worker Attitudes toward Change and Challenge.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the NATO Symposium: Aging and Technological Advances (Los Angeles, CA, August 22-26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adoption (Ideas); *Change; Change Strategies; *Employee Attitudes; Employer Attitudes; *Employer Employee Relationship; *Middle Aged Adults; Older Adults; Organizational Change; Retirement; *Technological Advancement; *Work Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Older Workers

ABSTRACT

A task force from a high technology company recently conducted a nine-month study to determine the attitudes of older workers toward work, management, technological change, and productivity. Data were gathered from personnel files; an age audit was undertaken, and 4,000 employees were randomly interviewed. The workers were asked to offer opinions and solutions to the following: attitudes about aging; the performance/productivity, creativity and use of older workers; technical obsolescence; growth and development; preretirement and retirement; and health. The data generated showed that 67 percent believed that management does not provide enough opportunity to stay up to date, especially for older employees; at the same time, 45 percent believed that management is not open to new ideas, and 47 percent felt that management did not care about its employees. Frustration arose from older workers' perception of intellectual underuse, with employees feeling that older workers spend their time on old projects, that management is not interested in using older workers, and that they are not trained in new technology. At no time during the study did resistance to change emerge; instead, older workers demanded change. The study concluded that older workers will accept change according to their degree of involvement in planning for it and their perception of management's intent. Fourteen recommendations were offered for companies to follow in dealing with older employees. (KC)

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OLDER WORKER ATTITUDES TOWARD CHANGE AND CHALLENGE

Presented

NATO Symposium: Aging and Technological Advances

Sponsored by: The NATO Special Programme Panel on Human Factors.

Host: Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center
University of Southern California.
August 22-26, 1983..

CE034573

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Older Worker Attitudes Toward Change & Challenge

When issues arise regarding the impact of rapidly advancing technology upon the older workforce, the attitudes of older workers toward change, toward their jobs and toward their company tend to become obscured by the endemic negative stereotyping about age in this society. These stereotypes produce assumptions which portray the older worker as resistant to change and new ideas intimidated by new technology and plateaued in their capacity to perform. It is assumed in many management circles that productivity levels correlate with age even though there is considerable evidence that older workers have the capacity for sustained productivity. What then is the problem?

In a recent exploratory study undertaken by a high technology company in the U.S., an internal task force was formed to determine whether or not the aging of the workforce was responsible for lowered productivity (57% of workforce over 40). The task force was composed of both managerial and non-managerial employees from a variety of organizational levels, functional areas and age categories in the line organizations. They were experienced, skeptical of company intent, and held the anticipated misconceptions about age and aging workers. They were also thoroughly knowledgeable about the realities of work and the working environment. The author served as the gerontological consultant to this task force over a nine month period assisting them with the design and implementation of the project and working with them to sensitize them to their assumptions about aging. Data was gathered from personnel files, an age audit was undertaken, and 4,000 employees were randomly sampled to form groups for interview purposes. They were asked to register their opinions and offer solutions to the following: attitudes about aging, the performance/productivity, creativity and utilization of older workers, technical obsolescence, growth and development, pre-retirement and retirement, and health. Questionnaires were also administered to gain demographic data and additional information on their views of the creativity and productivity of older workers, job assignments and developmental opportunities for older workers, opportunities for all workers to stay up to date, the match of skills and interests to their jobs, the openness of management to new ideas, the level of enthusiasm and self esteem, and their perceptions of management's attitude toward them. Some key responses:

67% believed that management does not provide enough opportunity to stay up to date (76% among non-managerial exempts)

47% believed that older employees are seldom given opportunities to develop themselves in their occupation/profession

45% believed that management does not seem to be open to new ideas

47% did not feel that management cared about its employees.

The comments about utilization were among the most angry and bitter in the entire study. Essentially, there was deep frustration arising from intellectual underutilization, expressed as follows:

- there is no apparent emphasis or interest in utilizing the older worker
- older workers spend their time working on older never-ending projects and have not time to start new projects
- older workers performance is often poor because they are shunted to 'backwater' jobs
- the creativity of older workers is not utilized, asked for, or recognized
- older workers are not trained in new technology; there is nothing for employees over 55
- older workers do not go to seminars that younger workers go to.

Although the written questionnaire data showed that only 1/3 of the sample thought that younger workers were usually given the most interesting work assignments, and only a minority felt that their abilities and interests were not well-matched to their present jobs (25% for abilities, 35% for interests). This minority represented the 50+ worker.

At no time during the study did resistance to change emerge. Rather, there was among the older workers, a demand for change. Those older workers accepting early retirement reflected a bitter loss of connection with the company, but not the job.

These negative findings reflect attitudes toward management, not toward the capacity of the older worker or their ability to 'carry the load' or meet new demands. A self-fulfilling prophecy appeared to be functioning in management expectations. Individual self-esteem appear to be suprisingly high given the climate (75% positive), but as one older worker put it "they treat you as though you can't do anything, but I know I can."

Tenure on the job correlated with plateauing and obsolescence, not age. The 'dissatisfaction with the job' factor affects retirement decisions and it is not factored into predictions of labor force trends in early retirement. If job match, job rotation, and job stimulation are considered as technological change invades the workforce, those trends could change given all the other external social factors impinging on the older worker (inflation, insecurity regarding viability of social benefit systems, and lack of them).

Other studies undertaken by Lindsey and Oden (1982), also show that the older workers, when given the challenge of automation for instance, respond very well. Their studies in six major companies found no resistance to automation among older workers when the company involved them in planning. In fact, they adjusted better as their expectation of automation's capacity to 'solve all problems' was far more realistic than that of younger workers, and they had a much better understanding of the work being automated due to their longer experience. There was no correlation across six studies of age with performance or adaptation to automation.

Technology is creating its own myths. Anxiety toward automation and other forms of technology may be no greater than the normal anxiety experienced when facing the 'new'. Acceptance will depend on the 'safety' of the environment in which the change is occurring, the degree of involvement in planning offered to the older worker, the clarity of management's intent, and the quality of the work itself.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS: U.S. High Technology Company

DEVELOP AND COMMUNICATE A CONSISTENT DIRECTION FOR BUSINESS

(This is a prerequisite for effectiveness of all other recommendations. Older workers have an emotional investment in their work and are concerned about long term strategic planning and future trends.)

DEVELOP AND FOLLOW A PEOPLE-ORIENTED PHILOSOPHY

One which creates an environment in which the employee is encouraged to feel: involved, empowered, well-utilized, appreciated, respected and permitted to develop their full potential.

ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN A HUMAN RESOURCE PLANNING FUNCTION

Determine the kinds of people the company needs (fresh outs of the higher quality, simply competent people with modest abilities). This also raises the question of hiring some older workers, not only the young.

EDUCATE ALL EMPLOYEES (ESPECIALLY MANAGERS) ABOUT AGING

Particular attention should be paid to older workers capabilities and needs, especially with regard to learning and work performance and the negative effects of stereotyping on those capabilities. Methods for enhancing the vitality and effectiveness of older workers should also be provided.

DEVELOP FORMAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS BOTH ATTITUDE AND SELF ESTEEM

To promote the concept of personal effectiveness and success and a climate which enables employees to experience psychological success at work.

DESIGN WORK TO BE INTERNALLY MOTIVATING (i.e. STIMULATING/CHALLENGING)

The design of jobs should be based on what people are potentially, rather than minimally capable of doing.

MATCH EMPLOYEES TO JOBS BASED ON THEIR INTERESTS AS WELL AS ABILITIES

Employees should have opportunities for self exploration and managers should be trained in appropriate measurement and matching techniques. A structured job rotation program should be implemented and all employees encouraged to participate.

INCREASE EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION IN PROBLEM SOLVING AND DESIGN MAKING

Accelerate the implementation of the employee involvement process. Create inter-generational teams.

DEVELOP EFFECTIVE INCENTIVES AND REWARDS FOR SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE

Managers at all levels should be competent at designing incentive systems that include reward for work, recognition/praise for good performance, pay appropriate to the level of performance etc.

DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Making learning expected and respected and part of a normal part of working.

DEVELOP LIFE-PLANNING PROGRAMS

Assist employees plan for their remaining work and non-working years, without the stigma that presently accompanies pre-retirement planning or being retired. Introduce a lattice rather than a 'ladder' career model.

PROMOTE HEALTH MAINTENANCE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMS ESPECIALLY FOR OLDER WORKERS

Conduct health risks analysis of the workforce.

PROVIDE PRE-RETIREES THE OPPORTUNITY FOR 'PHASED RETIREMENT'

Personnel policies should be adjusted to accomodate changes in desired work schedules or status. Reduce work loads, make lateral movements, give special assignments (mentors, sponsors, senior management advisors, think-tank participants, planning and evaluation teams etc.). A variety of flexible work schedules and part time work arrangements should be offered which place the emphasis upon the nature of the job, not on the time spent on it.

USE RETIREES FOR TEMPORARY, PART TIME WORK

Retirees should be used to help out during busy times or for rush jobs. Some should be given special on-going consulting status.